

# Research Brief

Student Life in High Schools Project

School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago

## Habits Hard to Break: A New Look at Truancy in Chicago's Public High Schools

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**H**igh absenteeism jeopardizes efforts to improve student performance in Chicago's public high schools. Students cannot perform well academically when they are frequently absent. An individual student's low attendance is a symptom of disengagement and academic difficulties. But when many students have low attendance in classes, such behavior undermines the capacity of all students and teachers to pursue high quality education.

In *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*, the Consortium on Chicago School Research documented that too often absenteeism, tardiness, and class cutting rise significantly as Chicago Public School (CPS) students move into high school.<sup>1</sup> While most eighth graders attend school regularly, the Consortium report found that the average Chicago tenth grader is absent six weeks of instructional time a year.

*"If I drop out of school, how am I gonna get a job, you know? I'm gonna just stay in there, no matter if I get some Fs or not. . . .I'll just keep putting more effort into it. Gotta get on the ball sometime. . . .I guess I just gotta break the habit [cutting classes]. . . .People who start cutting classes it, like, turns into a habit."*

*with assistance from the Consortium on Chicago School Research*

### Recent Truancy Initiatives

It has been a busy year in Chicago's schools. Many high schools started freshman academies. The central administration began several truancy initiatives to increase the capacity of schools to monitor and react to attendance problems. These initiatives include a new truancy hotline, computerized attendance and automated calling systems, and programs such as the Truancy Outreach Program that uses parents to assist in outreach to truant students. The CPS's *Design for High Schools* also makes truancy reduction a top priority and will provide additional opportunities for high schools to make substantial changes in student support services, school organization, and curricula. Because this research brief presents data from 1996, we cannot evaluate these new initiatives. Our goal is to provide detailed analyses that will assist individual high schools in using these new truancy initiatives and the opportunities afforded in the CPS's *Design for High Schools* to develop effective approaches to improving student engagement and attendance. We hope this analysis will raise important questions and provide a set of indicators that can be used by individual schools to evaluate their own recent efforts and build on initial successes.

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This research brief builds on *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* to take a closer look at absenteeism in Chicago's high schools. It focuses on attendance patterns in the CPS ninth grade class of 1995-1996, 30,000 adolescents.

The main findings of our analysis are the following:

- **A broader conception of truancy is necessary.** The CPS has two truancy problems—a problem of students who do not attend school and a problem of students who attend more or less regularly and then cut classes. These are two distinct behaviors which require different approaches by schools.

- **Problem attendance begins early in high school and worsens as the year progresses. Class cutting is widespread.** By the spring of 1996, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of CPS ninth graders missed two or more weeks of instruction in at least one major subject—a level of absenteeism that exceeds the CPS's definition of chronic truancy.

- **Much of the truancy problem happens because of class cutting, and the truants are often in and around the school.** About 40 percent of extreme truancy (students missing a month or more of classes per semester) occurs because students have high rates of class cutting or mix inconsistent attendance with regular cutting.

- **Even top students frequently cut class.** Forty-two percent of the highest achieving ninth graders missed two or more weeks of classes in at least one major subject in the second semester of 1996.

## A New Look at Truancy in Chicago

There is no agreed upon standard for what level of absenteeism constitutes a significant threat to learning. The Chicago Public Schools defines a student as truant if s/he has an unexcused absence on any given day, and a chronic truant if s/he has unexcused absences more than 10 percent of the days in a school year (18 of 180 days or nine days in a 90-day semester). In this brief, we look at full day absences as reported on students' transcripts. We also examine class cutting, a second way of accumulating absences in specific classes.

These two dimensions of absenteeism—missing full days versus cutting or missing some classes but not others—can be illustrated by looking at student transcripts. "Omar," a fictitious name for a real student, became truant very early on in high school. Despite very good attendance in elementary school (95 percent), he was absent 27 out of 90 days in the first semester of ninth grade. Even when he was in school, he appeared to be cutting classes. Omar missed more than half of his second semester. Thus, Omar's truancy is based on not coming to school at all.

"Yesenia's" transcript reflects a second common pattern of absenteeism. Yesenia is attending school but not going to class. In the first semester, she missed 11 days of school but had 20 absences in Algebra. In the second semester, Yesenia's full day attendance was better, but she missed almost half of her Algebra classes and over three-quarters of her typing class. Looking only at her second semester full day absences, Yesenia's seven absences did not classify her as a chronic truant when using the CPS definition of nine days per semester. But, Yesenia was clearly truant in Algebra.

What do these patterns of absenteeism and class cutting look like in the school system as a whole? We examined absenteeism in the second semester of ninth grade based on full day absences and by a student's worst attendance in any one major subject, for Yesenia that is Algebra.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, a student is characterized as:

- a **good attender** if s/he misses 10 or fewer classes or full days a semester.
- a **moderate truant** if s/he misses 11-20 classes or full days a semester (2 to 4 weeks).
- an **extreme truant** if s/he misses 21 days or more of classes or full days a semester (more than 4 weeks)

Omar: Extreme Full Day Absenteeism

Course	Semester 1 Grade	Semester 1 Class Absences	Semester 2 Grade	Semester 2 Class Absences
ALGEBRA	F	26	F	60
WORLD GEOGRAPHY	F	26	F	41
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	F	26	F	54
ENGLISH	F	32	F	58
BIOLOGY	F	38	F	65
TYPING/KEYBOARDING	F	29	F	58
<b>Full Day Absences</b>		<b>27</b>		<b>53</b>

Yesenia: A Chronic Class Cutter

Course	Semester 1 Grade	Semester 1 Class Absences	Semester 2 Grade	Semester 2 Class Absences
BIOLOGY	F	8	F	10
ENGLISH	F	10	D	7
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	D	9	D	9
TYPING/KEYBOARDING	F	20	F	77
WORLD GEOGRAPHY	D	13	D	12
ALGEBRA	F	20	F	43
<b>Full Day Absences</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>7</b>

### Malik: Reading, Writing, and Card Games— An Extreme Skipper

Malik is an engaging and thoughtful adolescent who likes learning and being challenged. His goals for high school were clear: be on the basketball team and be valedictorian. As one teacher observed, *"Malik is an acute [bright] student. . . .He's very outgoing and egotistical [confident]."* In elementary school, Malik was involved in activities, playing basketball on both the elementary school and church teams.

Malik's father supported this positive self image. Looking for a positive male role model, Malik moved in with his father during eighth grade. His dad emphasized a work ethic and church involvement and felt his strengths as a parent were *"role modeling, work, responsibility, promptness, and consistency."* He hopes Malik will be a lawyer and worries that he will *"give up on education. . .and have low motivation in the face of low opportunity."*

During the first semester of ninth grade, Malik got Bs and Cs. He was playing football and felt positive about the school and his transition, a view shared by his dad. To Malik, the biggest difference between elementary school and high school was the independence. And it was this independence that he struggled with. In the winter of ninth grade, Malik's school performance took a dramatic turn. He flunked three courses. He was absent only one day, but frequently cut classes. Malik's dad reacted strongly. His dad increased his homework monitoring and, according to Malik, was *"on me a lot and getting me on the right track. And I'm on punishment until the end of time!"*

Despite promising to turn things around, Malik's cutting intensified. *"You see, the problem was, I just started hanging around with these two guys and they got me playing cards. And then one day they be, like, 'aw come on, you can miss this just one day to go in the lunch room'. . . .And that's what messed me up: following them and trying to do what they think."* Malik played spades in the lunch room from the third quarter to the end of the school year. Despite missing only two days in the second semester, he was absent 18 days in biology, the class right after lunch.

In tenth grade, Malik started where he left off. In the first semester, he missed seven days of school but was absent over 20 days in all but two of his classes. In English, he missed 27 days. He claimed his English teacher was boring and showed no concern for whether students learned.

His geometry class was different. The teacher wanted him in class and, Malik said, he *"helps you really want to learn."* The teacher warned that if students missed more than two classes, they would fail. Malik missed two days in geometry and received a C. After being suspended for fighting in the cafeteria, Malik has begun to try harder. He has been attending classes more and is trying to transfer to another English class. He is, however, less confident. *"Well, I'm gonna try to do better, but that's all I can say. I'm gonna try. I don't really know, man."*

In the second semester, the majority (64 percent) of CPS ninth graders missed more than two weeks of instruction in one or more major subjects—English, Math, Social Studies, or Science. Forty-two percent of the ninth graders were either absent or cutting so many classes in the second semester that they missed a month or more of instruction in one or more major subjects.

### Schools Need a Broader Conception of Truancy

By considering both full day absences and cutting in a major subject, we gain a broader picture of the different ways that a student can accumulate absences in a particular class. For example, the 42 percent of CPS ninth graders who were extreme truants in the second semester followed one of three attendance patterns. Twenty-six percent looked like Omar and had 20 or more full day absences. Another 10 percent combined moderate (11-20) full day absences with class cutting. And, a final group of extreme truants (6 percent) were like "Malik" (see case study) and Yesenia, attending school more or less regularly but cutting classes frequently. Clearly, in many schools cutting is as easy as not going at all.

Students like Malik or Yesenia are not truant in the way most educators think of truancy. In fact, much of the truancy problem in the Chicago Public Schools is happening within and around the school buildings. The percentage of CPS ninth graders classified as extreme truants increases from 26 to 42 percent when we consider class cutting as well as full day absences. Thus, about 60 percent of extreme truancy (26÷42) in the second semester of ninth grade was because of full day absences, and 40 percent was because students were cutting classes and/or mixing cutting with inconsistent full day attendance.

High schools typically identify students as having problem attendance based on consecutive days absent, such as nine per semester. Our analysis so far suggests that high schools should use a broader conception of truancy. An approach that focuses on consecutive days absent both overlooks students who have very inconsistent attendance yet accumulate many full day

absences over the semester, and those who are in school but are cutting classes or are mixing cutting with full day absences.

### Attendance Problems Begin Early and Worsen as the Year Progresses

As we saw previously, at the end of ninth grade, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of CPS ninth graders were moderate to extreme truants in a major subject. For many, these attendance problems began early in high school. As early as the first semester, 50 percent of the entering ninth graders in 1995 missed two or more weeks of instruction in at least one major subject; 28 percent missed more than a month of instruction.

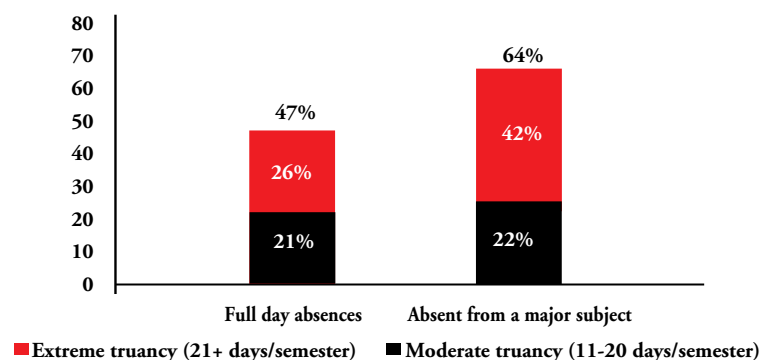
Getting students off on the right foot is important, but it is also critical to intervene quickly once signs of problem attendance emerge. Early problems don't go away and, in fact, generally worsen by the end of the school year. Of the students who began ninth grade as extreme truants, 89 percent ended the year with similar or worse levels of attendance. These students, like "Billie" (see case study on page 6), who represent almost one out of four ninth graders, clearly lost the school year before it began.

Equally worrisome is the fact that many students who are moderate truants or have good attendance are likely to become more disengaged from school as the year progresses. Almost half of the ninth graders who began the year with moderate absences—missing 2 to 4 weeks of a major subject—became extreme truants by the second semester. In addition, over one-third of those who began the year as good attenders became truants by the end of ninth grade. Thus, cutting and attendance problems spread to students who would normally be expected to conform to school norms.

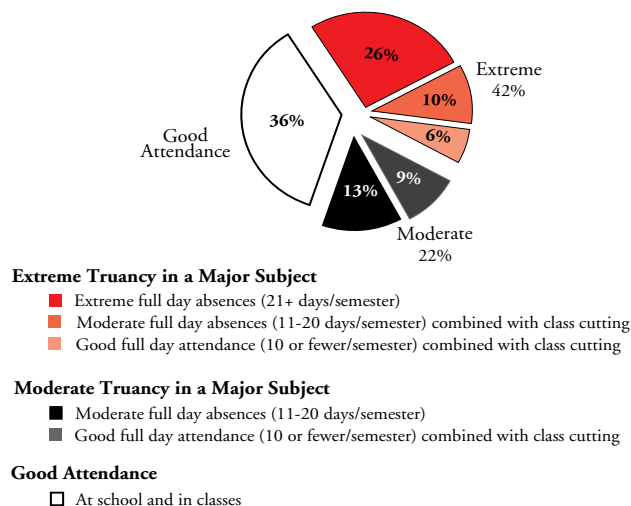
### Tardiness is a Problem, but Poor Attendance Occurs throughout the School Day

One of the ways in which students miss class is by arriving late for school. When students begin high school, they are given increased responsibility by parents and schools for getting themselves to school. Chicago high school students travel longer distances and must learn to use public transportation. Many adolescents

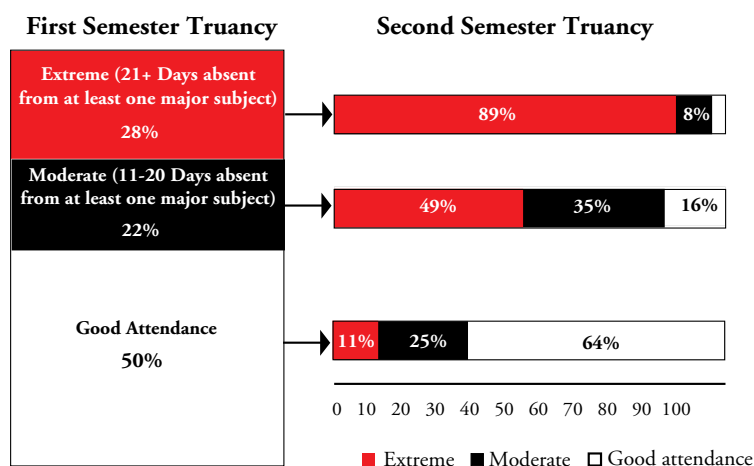
### Class Cutting Is a Big Part of the Problem Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



### Many Faces of Truancy Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



### Truancy Begins Early and Gets Worse Ninth Grade, CPS, 1995-96



### Billie: Truant and Homeless

Billie, an African-American adolescent, was in trouble in eighth grade. She had been in the same elementary school since kindergarten but had generally low skills. Largely unsupervised at home and often wanting for money, Billie had spotty eighth grade attendance. In the middle of eighth grade, she was transferred to another classroom, a transfer she had difficulty handling academically and socially. She coped with her problems by hanging out in an alley near school with much older boys. Billie's first home room teacher was a key support. Her teacher got her reenrolled in school, often bought her meals, and gave her attention. *"She bought me clothes, she bought me something for Christmas. . . . She had bought me an outfit and stuff, and if I had trouble with my work, she, like, spent extra time on me and stuff."*

Over the summer, Billie's home situation unraveled. Her mom lost custody, and Billie moved in with a sister in the suburbs. This arrangement didn't work. Billie bounced from relative to relative. She lived with an aunt until she got *"put out."* Her father gained custody but also appeared to be struggling with debt and homelessness. Billie's school address listed her father and her residing in a relative's nursing home room. She supported herself by selling drugs. For example, Billie explained that she needed a uniform to enroll in school. *"Cause I couldn't come to school 'cause my daddy ain't buy me what I need."* When asked how she was able to finally purchase a uniform, she answered, *"I bought it. . . I just got it selling drugs."*

She enrolled in high school in October, *"because I need to come to school. . . . Ain't nobody gonna hire me without no high school education. . . . cause I want a job and my own apartment so I can get away from everybody."* She spent little time in her classes, finding refuge in the social worker's office. By winter, Billie stopped coming to school. The relative died and the father left no forwarding address. For several months, Billie's mother and uncle claimed not to know Billie's whereabouts. By spring she had enrolled in the Job Corps, in a facility outside of Chicago where she continues to work toward finishing high school. Had Billie not enrolled in an alternative program and found this stable environment, her path might have continued downhill.

### Compare Your School's Results to the City-wide Results

Several graphs in this brief are available for each Chicago Public High School by visiting the Consortium's web site:

<http://www.consortium-chicago.org>

Additional copies of the report can be downloaded from the web site

have difficulty handling this new task. "Not getting there on time" is often cited by students as a primary reason for missing class. Without the cushion afforded by first period home rooms or advisories, many students find themselves spending their first period getting tardy slips or in-school suspension.

The first period of the day is the most often missed class. By the end of the school year, over half of CPS ninth graders missed two or more weeks of school in their first class. Nevertheless, while tardiness is clearly a problem, it alone does not account for the high numbers of class absences. Over 44 percent of the ninth graders missed two or more weeks of instruction during the middle of the school day—periods 4 to 6.

Across subjects, poor attendance is also quite uniform. Students are just as likely to be truant in English as in Math. These relatively consistent patterns in class absences suggest that in-attendance and class cutting more generally reflect poor overall school environments

### Schools Differ in Their Performance and Their Problems

In general, these findings suggest that many Chicago high schools are not places that provide the basics of a positive learning environment for ninth graders. High schools across the city, however, do vary in their full day attendance and rates of class cutting. Many have good attendance. The examples of Curie and Gage Park (see case studies on pages 10 and 11) confirm that urban high schools can develop effective approaches to class cutting and full day absenteeism.

In the ten schools with the worst attendance rates, full day absences and class cutting are so high that the average ninth grader is an extreme truant in at least one major subject by the second semester. For example, at Orr Community Academy, the average student missed about half of their instructional time (44 of 90 days) in at least one major subject. At schools like Tilden and South Shore, class cutting was so common that the median number of days absent from a major subject was twice the median number of full day absences.

*Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* designated these poorly performing high schools as "institutions organized for failure."<sup>3</sup> In these schools, norms have disintegrated to the point that class attendance appears optional. The possibilities for learning and quality instruction are severely undermined. In the long run, what these environments teach adolescents about acceptable social behavior may hinder them as much as their lack of opportunity to gain a high school education.

### Students with Weak Basic Skills Have Poor Attendance, but Cutting is Widespread

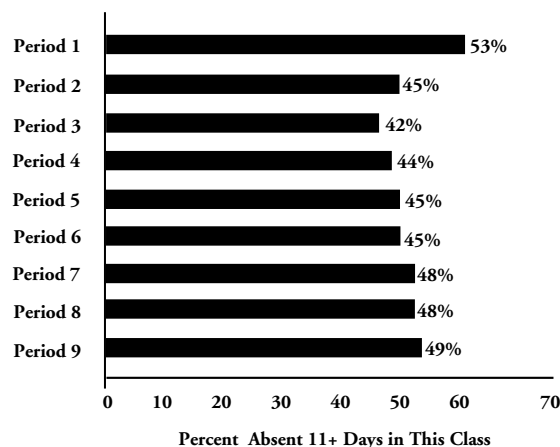
One of the reasons that attendance and class cutting rates vary across CPS high schools is because high schools serve very different populations of students. We viewed students' performance on the reading and math portions of the eighth grade Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) as an indicator of whether students had acquired the basic skills necessary to do high school level work.

Ninth graders with weak skills are much more likely to have significant attendance problems in high school. Over three-quarters of the students who had reading and math test scores two or more years below grade level were moderate to extreme truants in at least one major subject by the end of ninth grade (see graph on page 8). These poorly achieving students often just do not attend school. By the end of ninth grade, 60 percent of the students who entered high school in 1995 two or more years below grade level missed two or more weeks of school. Clearly, adolescents who have weak skills experience great difficulty with the academic and social demands of high school.

Students who have good academic skills have far fewer absences. But truancy rates among top students are almost twice as high when we factor in class cutting. Forty-two percent of the top Chicago students, those with achievement skills that place them on or above grade level for national norms, can be considered moderate to extreme truants in at least one major subject by the end of ninth grade. As a study by the Chicago Panel on School Policy noted in 1986, these

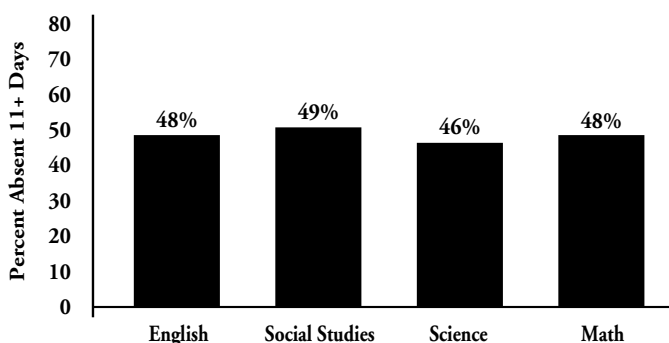
### Missing First Period Does Not Explain Truancy

Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



### Truancy is not Subject Specific

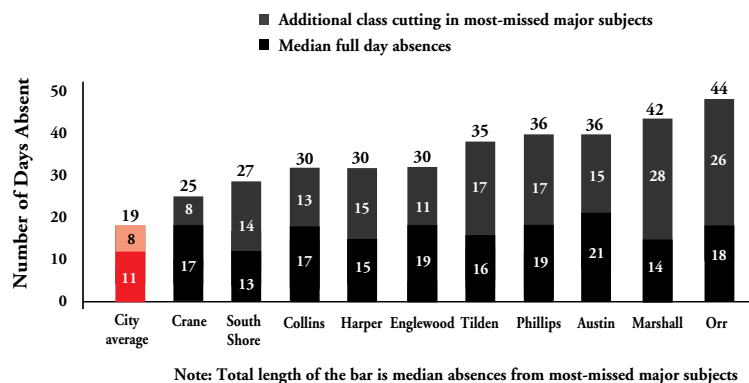
Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



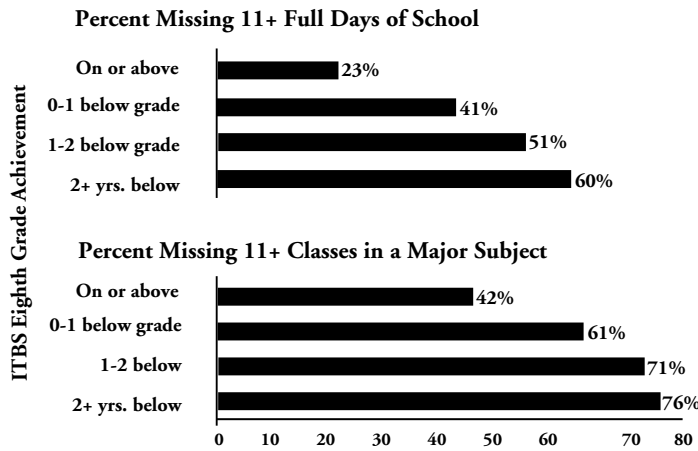
### Attendance and High Class Cutting

#### Ten Poorest Performing Schools

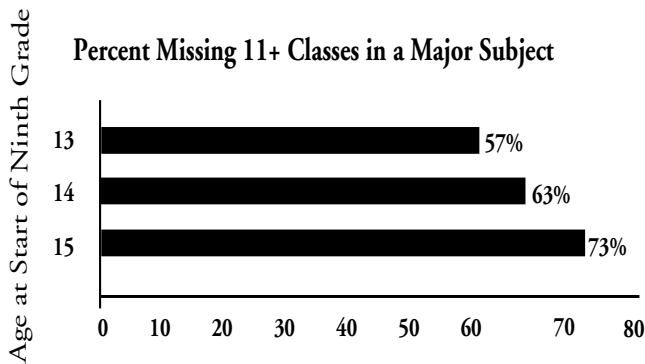
Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



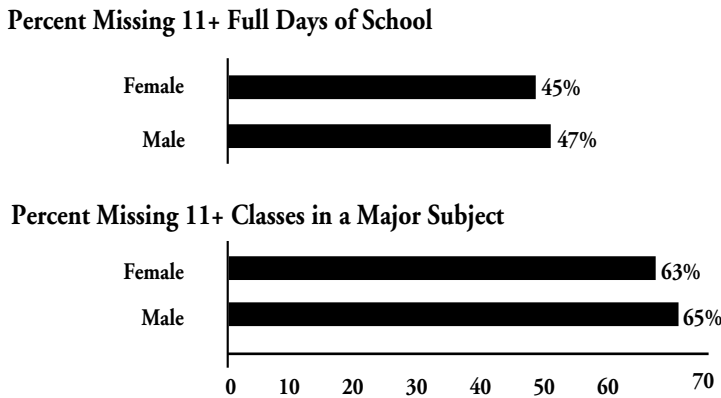
**Poorly Prepared Students Miss the Most School, but Even High Achieving Students Are at Risk**  
 Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



**Truancy Is Worse for Older Ninth Graders**  
 Second Semester, CPS, 1996



**Gender Does Not Explain Truancy**  
 Second Semester, Ninth Grade, CPS, 1996



rates reflect a "culture of cutting."<sup>4</sup> In schools with low academic standards and weak norms, even good students see it as acceptable to react to boredom, to not liking a teacher, or to peer pressure with behavior that they know is wrong.

Making sure that students enter high school with the necessary skills to do high school level work is an important truancy reduction strategy. Recently, the CPS began several initiatives that are designed to raise basic skills, such as instituting tougher eighth grade promotion criteria and the summer bridge program that provides students who do not meet promotion criteria with remedial help and a second chance. The CPS needs to evaluate these efforts carefully for their potential efficacy in raising skills and in improving student engagement and performance once they enter high school.

We specifically note that there is a potential tradeoff between the benefits of raising skills through tougher promotional policies with the costs of making students over-age for grade through non-promotion. Students who entered high school at age 15 rather than 14 had truancy rates in the second semester comparable to those of CPS ninth graders with the lowest skills. This poorer attendance is not fully explained by the fact that over-age students, on average, enter high school with poorer skills. The tradeoff underscores how important it is to carefully monitor the positive and negative benefits of tougher promotional policies. Schools should keep in mind that the best way to avoid this tradeoff is to identify students who have low basic skills well before eighth grade and provide remediation and extra support before a youth is at risk of non-promotion.

**Truancy Rates Do Not Differ Much by Gender**

A common perception is that truancy is more of a problem in high schools than in elementary schools because students encounter increased gang activity as they move into ninth grade. Such activity both contributes to attendance problems for students who are being recruited as gang members and to truancy for others who may be afraid to go to school.



We examined the potential role of gangs by comparing truancy rates by gender. Since males are more likely to be gang members and the targets of gang harassment, we would expect that attendance problems would be higher among males if gang problems were a significant contributor to CPS's attendance problems. Surprisingly, ninth grade males are not much more likely to be truant than females. Forty-five percent of the females versus 47 percent of the males were absent more than two weeks of instructional time in the second semester of ninth grade. Males were slightly more likely to be extreme (more than 4 weeks) rather than moderate (2 to 4 weeks) truants.

Gang problems and violence are central struggles in the lives of urban males. We see clear evidence in our analysis of individual students that gangs and violence have terrible consequences for inner city youth. Nonetheless, the lack of gender differences in ninth grade truancy rates underscores the conclusion that absenteeism and class cutting in high schools are not solely or even primarily driven by these issues. Truancy must be addressed by creating school environments that engage both males and females positively and provide safe and supportive communities for adolescents. While the symptoms may differ by gender, clearly both groups are experiencing similar difficulties in the transition to high school. For males like "Oscar," lack of success and positive opportunities may increase the pull of gangs as an alternative way to cope with problems and gain self-respect.



### Oscar: Becoming a Gang Leader

Oscar, a Mexican-American adolescent, is extremely bright. His eighth grade achievement scores placed him at tenth grade in mathematics and at ninth in reading. He had perfect attendance in elementary school and twice won attendance awards. His eighth grade teachers commented: "*Oscar is a very energetic student and will challenge you to the end. He has a thirst for knowledge and answers.*" "*Oscar is one of the students I am most proud of. . . . He gained confidence and self-esteem. He now knows he is capable of great things.*" Oscar talked about loving learning and the impact his basketball coach and teacher had on his motivation. "*Like before it was a bad habit. I didn't want to do my homework. . . . But now, like, if I don't do my homework, I don't sleep at night. . . . So I wake up at night and do my homework until I finish.*" Oscar wanted to be a teacher or an engineer and hoped to play basketball in high school.

While he was still in eighth grade, Oscar was already having trouble with gangs. His older brother and some of his friends were gang members, and he was often mistaken for one. During the summer, Oscar and his best friend were shot in a drive by. His friend was killed. Despite this, he resisted gang membership.

Oscar began ninth grade depressed and anxious. Because of his gunshot wound, he could not play basketball. He was disappointed in his high school. "*I only got one teacher that I like. . . and, like, the other teachers they don't teach nothing. . . . They can't control the class. In English, that teacher will talk to us. Everybody, everybody listens when she teaches. Other teachers, they [the students] don't respect them.*" Oscar was particularly negative about his Algebra teacher. "*That's so boring [Algebra]. I passed it and I only went five times. . . . He gives us homework, but he writes it on the board and nobody's paying attention. Nobody does their homework. And if you do, I don't think he even collects it.*" He knew that he was failing because of class cutting and spent increasing amounts of time smoking marijuana instead of going to class. Despite poor attendance, missing 21 days in the second semester and 39 in Algebra, Oscar ended ninth grade failing only Algebra.

By the summer after ninth grade, Oscar had joined the gang and was quickly moving up in the ranks. He returned to tenth grade but was immediately suspended for fighting. He missed 40 days in the first semester and cut classes often. When asked how being a gang member affected his school work, Oscar responded, "*A lot. Like right now I regret it, but it's got to a point where I'm too into that. . . . I'm thinking if I get a job maybe it'll keep me away from the streets. . . . My freshman year, I wasn't really into it [gangs] but everything happened. . . . They all come to me. . . once you get respect. . . . It's not more fun, but it's. . . like I have power.*" Anticipating his expulsion, he is considering a GED or the Job Corps.

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## BREAKING THE CYCLE OF TRUANCY

Addressing the two dimensions of attendance problems we identified in this research brief—cutting class and full day absences—will require new attention from both the schools and teachers. The high rates of absenteeism and course cutting in CPS high schools, even among high-achieving students, point to an overall breakdown in school norms

### **Curie High School: Success in the Face of Overcrowding**

Curie High School, a vocational magnet school on the city's southwest side, is a place of ordered business. Curie is the second largest high school in the Chicago Public School system. It serves a racially and ethnically mixed student body of African-American, Asian, Latino, and white immigrant and non-immigrant students drawn from throughout the southwest side. Curie has so many students, over 900 freshmen alone, that it operates on three schedules. Its programming is geared to serve the extraordinary diversity represented in its students and families. In addition to an array of extracurricular and after school programs, Curie's burgeoning Saturday programs mean that the school is teeming with activity six days a week, twelve hours a day. On Saturdays, students attend Saturday schools that provide academic help and recreation, enrichment programs for college Advanced Placement credits, and Polish language programs. These students are often joined by parents studying English as a Second Language.

Despite overcrowding, Curie's staff has made truancy a priority. This focus is reflected in the efforts of its new principal Wilfredo Ortiz. Ortiz's philosophy is one of collective adult responsibility that begins with himself. The cornerstone of Curie's truancy program involves compiling a daily list of absentees with consecutive absences. Ortiz carefully monitors these lists and frequently meets with attendance facilitators to talk about individual students and progress on specific cases. Ortiz directs meetings with students, parents, attendance office staff, and the counselor for students who have problem attendance. Formal contracts are signed by the student, parent, and principal that outline steps to remediate problems and communicate clear consequences to students and parents.

Ortiz is quick to point out that some of these systems were in place when he arrived at Curie—a good computer attendance system and attendance facilitators. He has added leadership and a closed campus for freshmen. He and his staff stress that most attendance problems can be addressed by creating an orderly school environment, monitoring students, and quickly following up. Once students realize that cutting and not coming to school are not behaviors taken lightly, only a few chronically truant students who need more sustained intervention remain. The result is that Curie has one of the lowest absence rates in major subjects in the city. Ortiz emphasizes that truancy is largely an academic issue and that teachers must focus on creating high-quality learning environments that hook students into learning. What is true inside classrooms, must also be true outside classrooms. Adults, parent aides, and security guards monitor hallway transitions between classes and are quick to greet visitors and stop to guide “lost” students.

Mary Ann Cannon, the head of Counseling, stresses the personal nature of the intervention approach used at Curie. In addition to contracts, Cannon and other counselors often act as brokers between truant students and teachers. She helps reinstate the student in class. Disciplinary actions taken against truants focus on providing a second chance. At Curie, being open and supportive to students does not conflict with high standards. It is critical to combine tough rules and high expectations with an engaging atmosphere inside class and out.

and a lack of attentiveness to adolescents' need for challenge, structure, and personal support. When students are bored and unchallenged, when schools do not set and enforce high standards of behavior on a day to day basis, and when schools fail to monitor behavior and then intervene to correct problems, all the ingredients for adolescent disengagement are in place. Most adolescents can be expected to test the boundaries. A lack of adult monitoring and a disorderly learning environment are difficult for any student but are a recipe for disaster for freshmen who face new independence, increased academic demands, and new peer pressures.

Cutting classes and not going to school are vicious cycles. These behaviors become habits that are hard to break. A student may not go to class initially because she doesn't like the teacher, is having academic difficulty, has friends who pressure her to stay at lunch, or didn't do the homework for the day. Without an immediate reaction from school staff or other adults, cutting becomes an option rather than facing that teacher or making-up homework. Eventually, when a student returns to class, she realizes that she is very far behind.

Ninth graders who are absent from school a month or more, about one out of four, are caught in especially difficult cycles. If all students need to be in schools that are orderly and consistent, set high academic standards, and provide supportive relationships, then students who have the least amount of resources at home suffer most from the lack of these environments in high school. These students may lack social and academic skills to handle new independence and more complex learning environments. Students with extreme family problems like Billie or stresses outside of school like Oscar often fall through the cracks in school transitions. As students move into high school, they lose the adult support and monitoring that is more characteristic of elementary schools. In large, anonymous high schools, there is less opportunity for school personnel to go beyond the immediate behavior to understand the problems students might be experiencing out

of school. Extreme full day truants become the marginal members of our high schools; they often continue their enrollment, not accumulating credits, and hope eventually to turn things around.

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Chicago public high schools have the opportunity in the next several years to make significant changes to improve the quality of their learning environments and increase their capacity to address attendance problems by creating smaller instructional units, freshman academies, advisories, extended day activities, and academic support centers.<sup>5</sup> As schools proceed, the question of how changes can be used to address full day absences and class cutting should be a central component of each school's reform plans. When we look at schools that are making progress in reducing full day absences and class cutting, we find that there are three central themes that underlie effective school approaches. It is around these themes that we outline more specific recommendations.

### **Gage Park High School:**

#### **The Holistic Approach to Organized Personalism**

Gage Park is a predominantly African-American and Latino high school in a mixed income neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. Gage Park's low attendance rates and test scores tell a typical story of a challenged school serving high-risk students. In 1996, Gage Park was placed on probation for its poor performance. However, a walk through the school early in spring 1997 shows a school making progress with a clean and orderly school environment, energized staff, and motivated students. On the front page of the school newsletter, Mrs. Pirtle, the Attendance Coordinator, announces, "Our school is on the move." With daily attendance rates reaching 88 percent, the administrators, teachers, and staff at Gage Park feel they are working on a successful, multi-faceted approach to dealing with full day absences and class cutting.

When Dr. Audrey Donaldson arrived at Gage Park four years ago, her first goal as principal was to create a safe, clean, and regulated environment for learning—a place where students and staff would choose to spend time. The school's next task was to create a system capable of carefully monitoring student attendance and creating "organized personalism"—a school environment characterized by high degrees of staff cooperation, respect for students, and clear and consistent expectations.

Central to Gage Park's efforts is a zero-tolerance approach to class cutting. Following second period division, the attendance office tabulates absences. Absence lists are distributed to teachers by 11:00 a.m. Daily, teachers identify students who cut class. Parents are called that same day. If more than three unexcused absences occur, a parent conference is scheduled. Teachers, recognizing that many students were cutting classes and staying inside the building, organized a between-class monitoring program or hall sweep. Each teacher spends the first five minutes of one of his or her preparation periods "sweeping" for cutters. In sweeps, teachers start in different parts of the building, converge, and sweep class cutters into one classroom where they remain for the period. Staff feel that this approach has virtually solved the problem of in-school class cutting.

Recognizing that truancy and class cutting disproportionately affect low-skilled students, school staff target academic problems as well as behavior problems. Students are encouraged to participate in the Sylvan Learning Center and the After School Academy for additional tutoring and homework assistance. When a student cuts class, the Attendance Office personnel gets missed class work from the teacher. Students are required to make up missed work. Teacher Ivory Hobbs also stresses that Gage Park is making concerted efforts to be positive by providing awards to students who are improving attendance and achievement. These efforts combine to set high and consistent expectations for class attendance and achievement combined with personalized support.

Gage Park staff feel strongly that mechanized, one way telephone systems and procedural approaches can be helpful but are only supplements to a highly personalized "in your face" approach. They place a high priority on talking directly to parents. Home visits are encouraged to solicit parents' opinions and create opportunities for discussion about the causes and possible solutions to student problems. Since so many students come from poor families with unstable living situations, the school requests up to six phone numbers for close relatives, friends, and neighbors. Unanticipated events like family moves and disconnected phones rarely interfere with the school's capacity to follow through with home contacts.

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**Theme 1: Truancy reduction requires school-wide improvement.** In effective schools, adults work together to develop tailored solutions consistent with broader efforts to improve student learning. As teachers and staff at Gage Park High School found, most attendance problems can be addressed by creating strong school norms for high attendance and achievement, and instructional environments in which adolescents can learn and grow. When teachers clearly signal that class cutting and tardiness are unacceptable, when absences are proactively responded to by school staff, and when students' concerns and struggles are noticed and responded to, the average student will react positively. In short, a school environment in which class attendance is taken seriously sends the message that teachers' work and students' learning are valued. It also says, *"You will be missed when you are not here,"* a message highly valued by adolescents. Most students will follow school norms. Once schools establish a positive environment, they can focus on a much smaller group of students who need more sustained intervention.

**Recommendation 1: High schools must provide a basic infrastructure that supports teachers' efforts to improve attendance.** Central elements of school organization include:

- Information systems that provide teachers and parents with timely information on class cutting and full day absences,
- Smaller more personalized instructional environments in which teachers can work together, get to know students, and establish norms,
- Clearly defined policies that are communicated to parents and students and applied consistently, and
- Support services to provide extra help when problems are identified.

**Recommendation 2: Provide opportunities for teachers and staff to get to know and work with students, individualizing attendance monitoring and intervention.** Many effective high schools use special procedures, extra resources provided by truancy and academic support programs, and computer or phone systems to support broader school-wide efforts to improve student performance. At the core, however, staff stress the importance of personal interactions with students and parents and the need to adopt a problem solving and individualized approach. As "Community High" found, just adding special truancy programs is not effective unless all adults agree that improving attendance is central to the day-to-day mission of the school. Truancy efforts cannot survive if teachers adopt the attitude that their goal is to do a good job with only the kids who show up for class. Structural and program changes, moreover, must be explicitly designed to address attendance. An example is advisory groups, a central recommendation in the *Design for High Schools*. Advisory groups may be a useful tool but are only likely to work well if:

- Attendance monitoring and intervention is articulated as a primary responsibility of advisors.
- Advisors develop personal relationships with students and are provided training and curricula.
- Advisors, in turn, are supported with adequate time allotted for advisory responsibilities and referral, program, and professional support.
- All school staff are involved in discussions of how to use and design advisories to improve attendance, consistent with school-wide efforts to improve instruction.

**Recommendation 3: Identify truants, tardies, and class cutters early.** While truancy reduction begins with prevention, it is equally important for schools to identify and react swiftly to in and out of school attendance problems. At present, few students who begin high school extremely truant are able to turn around this behavior. Many more become disengaged as the year progresses, making consistent monitoring especially important.

**Recommendation 4: Work with parents to monitor and intervene on behalf of students.** Too often communication lines between high schools and families are one-way and punitive. Parents complain often about not being informed that class cutting is a problem until it is too late. School personnel find it frustrating when they perceive that a student's family is not involved in a child's education. Parents experience equal frustration when they feel that their efforts to monitor and manage their child's behavior are undermined within the school building. When school staff, teachers, and parents are working together, adolescents get the message that adults are "on the same page" in efforts to address behavior.

**Theme 2: Truancy is an academic problem and solutions must be linked to the classroom and learning.** Ultimately, reducing class cutting and full day absences will require high school classrooms to be more challenging and engaging places for adolescents. The more students are invested in school, the greater the leverage for adults in enforcing good behavior and good decision making. At Manley High School, for example, students who cut a class must stay after school that day to make up work and complete homework, even if they are involved in after-school activities. Having students participate in extra-curricular, after-school activities is a central focus at Manley. This class cutting policy provides students with a daily reinforcement that cutting comes with costs; it creates extra incentives for students not to cut, and ensures that students do not lose class time for disciplinary purposes. The importance of defining truancy as an academic problem and having teachers play a central role in designing and managing attendance efforts leads to the following two recommendations.

**Recommendation 5: Have clear plans for re-integration and academic recovery.** Being out of school or out of a class for an extended period of time often means that students re-enter classrooms after missing many days of instruction. For those who were having academic difficulty to begin with, the re-entry task appears daunting. When students are reinstated in a school or classrooms after many consecutive absences, they need assistance from adults in rebuilding relationships with their teachers and in recovering from academic difficulty. Truancy policies and programs must include plans for reintegrating students and continued follow-up.

**Recommendation 6: Design responses to class cutting and tardiness to maximize learning and minimize time outside of the classroom.** Discipline policies should not exacerbate students' academic difficulties by taking them out of class. In-school suspensions for tardiness or class cutting, in which students lose more class time, should be used with caution. Schools should experiment with after-school or Saturday programs and should link discipline actions to class work so as to remediate rather than exacerbate academic difficulty.

### **Community High: A School in Transition, Struggling with Implementation**

Community High serves a 100 percent African-American student population in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. The school was placed on probation for low achievement scores and recently hired a new principal and attendance coordinator. A sign near the attendance office reports the attendance rate over the last several days—77 percent. Class cutting and full day absences are so high that Community High has one of the worst truancy rates in the city.

Community High recently adopted many of the strategies and programs that other high schools are using to improve attendance: calling parents when a student cuts class, revising policies so students do not miss additional school days for disciplinary reasons, increasing the academic focus of school suspensions, and hiring parent attendance facilitators for home visits to chronically truant students and parents. The attendance coordinator and parent home visitors are a committed staff whose goal is "to get every kid back referred to our office" and to welcome them back into school. Since the beginning of the school year, they have contacted nearly 700 parents.

Despite these strategies, staff have found it difficult to get things moving and describe the inertia created by years of operating within a dysfunctional system. Initial attendance efforts were daunting. In the beginning of the school year, the administration had to declare amnesty days. The student cuts had become so extensive that it was impossible to overcome the backlog. Even to date, attendance officers are not always able to follow their own protocol for class cutting because so many students accumulate many cuts in a short period of time, making timely follow-up especially challenging. To complicate matters, the school has been operating without an up-to-date computer system.

The vice principal focuses his current efforts on teachers, believing that if they became more effective in motivating and engaging students, attendance would improve. There has been some resistance from teachers, students, and parents to buy in to these new policies and develop a school-wide approach. Many teachers don't turn in cut slips. Once the attendance coordinators get students back to school, there are no agreed upon efforts that attendance officers can use to get students remediation and back on track. The school has several tutoring programs and cooperative social service agencies that operate in and near the school. Both the attendance officer and vice principal comment, however, that they have difficulty getting students and their families to use these services.

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### **Theme 3: Schools must pay special attention to the needs of students who have high full day absences.**

In this brief, we argue that the CPS has two truancy problems—a problem of students who do not attend school and a problem of students who attend more or less regularly and then cut classes. These two problems have very different implications for schools. Students who miss a month or more of school often have multiple problems and may need extra support, outreach, and attention. Too often, school staff are passive observers of students' problems and behaviors. Intervention and dealing with problems must start, as in the case of "Ali," with schools taking students' problems seriously and looking beyond immediate behavior to understand students' needs. We know that without intervention, few adolescents can recover by themselves and with intervention, as in the case of Ali, school personnel have an important role in making inroads into problems. Critical, also, is ensuring that teachers can work together with school staff so that the teachers are not alone in decoding the puzzle of students' behavior and are involved in remediating problems.

#### **Ali: Competing Demands and a Principal Who Intervened**

Ali is a Mexican adolescent whose goals were to finish high school and become a teacher. Her eighth grade teachers felt that she might have trouble doing high school work. One teacher remarked, "*[Ali] is very distracted by the outside happenings around here. She needs to become more focused on studying.*" This lack of discipline was reflected in consistently poor grades and low achievement scores.

Ali started ninth grade late because her family moved. Once enrolled, Ali attended sporadically, missing 29 days in the first semester. Initially evasive about her absences, she later explained, "*I was doing my homework, but then. . . the same old story: gotta stay home and baby sit. That's when I stopped doing my work and I stopped going to school.*" Both of Ali's sisters dropped out of high school, and she felt her parents expected her to do the same. She was absent 41 days in the second semester of ninth grade. Her teachers warned her about the implications. "*They just tell me to come to classes before it's too late and 'don't come crying to me in June.'*" Not surprisingly, Ali failed all of her courses. She resolved not to drop out but to start anew next year.

During the summer, Ali's high school hired a new principal who made it his duty to recapture truants. After missing several days during the first semester, Ali received a phone call from the principal. Ali explained that she was taking care of her little brother. The principal then called her parents and, in Spanish, explained that Ali needed to be in school. Ali's father rearranged his work schedule so that she could go to school. She reenrolled and now has only sporadic absences when her family's schedules don't work. "*I've been coming to school every day now. All this past week I came. . . because my sister got her schedule, my dad got his schedule, and now I don't have to stay home and babysit.*" During the most recent quarter, Ali significantly improved her grades, receiving one A. She missed only six days of school.

**Recommendation 7: Open better lines of communication between elementary and high school teachers.** Elementary school teachers are the best source of information for identifying students who are likely to have truancy problems or who are having family or social problems. Ninth grade advisors, teachers, and counselors need contact with elementary school teachers to talk about individual students, discipline approaches, and curriculum.

**Recommendation 8: Schools must find ways to fill critical mental health and social service gaps for adolescents at risk of failure.** Urban adolescents are most likely to experience mental health problems and are often unlikely to receive treatment for these problems. The experience of losing a family member or friend, being a victim of violence, or having family problems erodes school performance. Inconsistent attendance at school is often the first sign of home, mental health, or behavioral problems. While schools legitimately resist taking on new roles, adolescents are the most likely to fall through cracks in already overburdened social service and mental health systems. High schools need to take a more proactive stance in identifying student problems and promoting needed service integration in school communities. Such developments are the essential spirit of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act—members of the school community working together to advance opportunities for all of the children.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Penny Bender Sebring, Anthony S. Bryk, Melissa Roderick, Eric Camburn, Stuart Luppescu, Yeow Meng Thum, BetsAnn Smith, Joseph Kahne, *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1996), 29-31.

<sup>2</sup>School transcripts report full day absences but do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. An excused absence is one in which a student has a legitimate reason and a parental note to miss school. Because transcripts do not subtract out excused absences, we categorize students as being good attenders, moderate, or extreme truants using slightly more conservative benchmarks than the CPS definition of a chronic truant. Thus, our truancy categories may slightly overestimate truancy rates if we calculated rates based only on unexcused absences. At the same time, students who are cutting many classes may accumulate half-day absences. Because of half-day absences, we are probably underestimating the extent to which cutting contributes to truancy. Notice that Malik's and Yesenia's full day absences are higher than they are in specific courses. This could mean that Malik and Yesenia cut so much that they were accumulating half-day absences.

<sup>3</sup>Sebring, *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*, 60.

<sup>4</sup>G. Alfred Hess, Jr., Emily Wells, Carol Prindle, Paul Liffman, and Beatrice Kaplan, "Where's Room 185?" *How Schools Can Reduce Their Dropout Problem, Part I* (Chicago: Chicago Panel on School Policy).

<sup>5</sup>Chicago Board of Education, *Chicago Public Schools: Design for High Schools* (Chicago: Office of High School Services and Support, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>Chicago Public Schools, *Children First: Self-Analysis Guide* (Chicago: Department of Research, Evaluation and Planning, 1994).

### The Essential Supports and the Consortium on Chicago School Research

The Chicago Public School's *Children First: Self-Analysis Guide* outlines five essential supports for student learning drawn from research on effective urban schools: school leadership, parent and community partnerships, a student-centered learning environment, a quality instructional program, and professional development and collaboration.<sup>6</sup> In these research briefs, we primarily focus on two of the five essential supports—the presence of a student-centered learning climate and a quality instructional program.

Research on urban school improvement suggests that schools can cultivate student engagement through their instructional programs and school climate. Such a "student-centered" learning climate has four characteristics. First, it is safe, disciplined, and respectful. Second, it presses all students to do significant academic work and sets high standards of behavior. Third, a student-centered learning climate provides students needed support through greater caring, personalization, and opportunities to develop academically and socially. And fourth, for adolescents, a student-centered learning climate engages students in ways that promote school membership and a positive sense of identity and future orientation (challenge and academic press).

The Consortium on Chicago School Research has contributed to the system's development of the five essential supports and has adapted this framework for several of its reports. The Consortium is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that conducts research on ways to improve Chicago's public schools and assess the progress of school improvement and reform. Formed in 1990, it is a multi-partisan organization that includes faculty from area universities, senior management and research staff from the Chicago Public Schools, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, the Chicago Teachers Union, and education advocacy groups. The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.

*This report reflects the interpretation of its authors. Although the Consortium assisted in the development of this research, no formal endorsement by its Steering Committee members, their organizations, or the Consortium should be assumed.*

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### What Is This Research Brief?

This is the first in a series of research briefs which will be produced by the Student Life in High Schools Project with the assistance of the Consortium on Chicago School Research and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) over the next three years. The purpose of these briefs is to produce analysis that will assist high school reform. These briefs are not intended to evaluate specific aspects of current reform efforts, the progress of individual schools, or endorse particular reform strategies. Rather, the goal is to provide information that will help schools grapple with some of the more difficult issues facing CPS high schools, their students, and families. We attempt to place our analysis within the larger framework that guides Chicago school reform (see “The Essential Supports and the Consortium on Chicago School Research”) and the initiatives proposed as part of the Chicago Public School’s *Design for High Schools*. Subsequent briefs will focus on parental involvement and course failure patterns in different subjects.

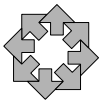
Each brief draws on several sources of data. We examine the school transcripts of 30,000 students who formed the Chicago Public School’s entering ninth grade class of 1995. We also draw upon data and research findings from the Student Life in High Schools Project’s (SLP) longitudinal study of the transition to high school. This longitudinal study followed over 90 students from the end of eighth grade to the end of tenth grade. Researchers interviewed students once every three months, collected school transcript data, asked teachers for their assessment of the student’s performance, and surveyed parents to gain their perspective. Future briefs will rely on more recent transcripts and will use survey data on students and teachers provided by the Consortium on Chicago School Research’s surveys conducted in 1997.

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